

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 31, 2021

8:02 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair
Representative Andi Story, Co-Chair
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky
Representative Grier Hopkins
Representative Mike Prax
Representative Mike Cronk
Representative Ronald Gillham

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S) :

State Board of Education & Early Development

Lorri Van Diest - Palmer

- CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

Professional Teaching Practices Commission

Lem Wheelles - Anchorage

- CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

University of Alaska Board of Regents

Ralph Seekins - Fairbanks

- CONFIRMATION(S) ADVANCED

HOUSE BILL NO. 60

"An Act relating to mental health education."

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HB 60

SHORT TITLE: PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) CLAMAN

02/18/21	(H)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/15/21
02/18/21	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/18/21	(H)	EDC, FIN
03/31/21	(H)	EDC AT 8:00 AM DAVIS 106

WITNESS REGISTER

LORRI VAN DIEST, Appointee
State Board of Education & Early Development
Palmer, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee to the State Board of Education & Early Development.

LEM WHEELLES, Appointee
Professional Teaching Practices Commission
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

RALPH SEEKINS, Appointee
University of Alaska Board of Regents
Fairbanks, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified as appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents.

REPRESENTATIVE MATT CLAMAN
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: As prime sponsor, introduced HB 60.

SOPHIE JONAS, Staff
Representative Matt Claman
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: On behalf of Representative Claman, prime sponsor of HB 60, provided a sectional analysis of the proposed committee substitute, Version B.

JASON LESSARD, Executive Director
National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), Anchorage Chapter
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony in support of HB 60.

CLAIR RHYNEER, Representative
Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling (MHATS)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony in support of HB 60.

KEEGAN BLAIN, Representative
Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling (MHATS)
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided invited testimony in support of HB 60.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[8:02:36 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HARRIET DRUMMOND called the House Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:02 a.m. Representatives Cronk, Gillham, Hopkins, Prax, Zulkosky, Story, and Drummond were present at the call to order.

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S) :

State Board of Education & Early Development
Professional Teaching Practices Commission
University of Alaska Board of Regents

[8:03:25 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the first order of business would be confirmation hearings for the governor's appointees to the State Board of Education & Early Development, Professional Teaching Practices Commission, and University of Alaska Board of Regents.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened the confirmation hearing for Lorri Van Diest, appointee to the State Board of Education & Early Development. She invited Ms. Van Diest to speak to why she would like to continue to serve on this board.

[8:03:47 AM](#)

LORRI VAN DIEST, Appointee, State Board of Education & Early Development, testified as appointee to the State Board of Education & Early Development ("State Board"). She stated that

Governor Dunleavy reappointed her to the board in January 2020. Previously Governor Walker appointed her to serve out the remaining term of the vacated seat, so she has been on the board for three years. Currently she is the Second Vice Chair and Regulations Committee Chair. She related that she is a lifelong Alaskan. She listed her work experience, including time as a guidance counselor, teacher, and curriculum coordinator [resume included in the committee packet]. She said having boots on the ground in a local school gives her direct insight into the daily workings of the school.

8:06:09 AM

MS. VAN DIEST said the perspective she brings to the State Board is her career in public education as a classroom teacher, guidance counselor, coach, and curriculum coordinator. Her lens and focus has been and continues to be the safety, health, and wellbeing of Alaska's students. Alaska's children must feel secure in their school environment and have a connection to their school and the staff. Establishing relationships and building connections between students and staff is a critical component to the safety and wellbeing of Alaska's students. Without students feeling connected to school, the learning of reading, math, and other subjects doesn't happen well.

MS. VAN DIEST noted that Alaskans are living in unprecedented times where safety and wellbeing is continually challenged. She said COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to do education in different ways. School districts are doing in-person learning, virtual learning, or a hybrid of the two. Continual adjustments and modifications have been made since the start of the pandemic. [Alaska's educators] have learned how to be flexible, efficient, and open to change. When shutdowns occur for COVID cases occur in her schools, teachers are quick to adjust to virtual education as they do this as part of their daily routine. Throughout the year, her schools have been fortunate to not have total school closures for very many school days. Individual classrooms have had to quarantine, and this hasn't affected the other classrooms.

MS. VAN DIEST praised the Department of Education & Early Development (DEED), stating its response to the pandemic has been stellar. From the get-go the department has listened and responded to the needs of all Alaska's school districts, from the immediate development of the website aklearns.org to holding several weekly virtual meetings with district leaders and other educational stakeholders, implementing an Alaska statewide

virtual system, and providing webinars. Working with the Department of Health and Social Services, DEED developed the Alaska Smart Start 2020 framework guidance for starting the school year and held webinars to support districts.

MS. VAN DIEST stated she is excited to serve on the board for another term and work with Commissioner Johnson and his team. She wants to be part of the commitment they share with the board around the priorities and goals of Alaska's Education Challenge. She wants to be part of moving forward after the pandemic has subsided and all students can once again be safe in their learning environments. The indicators outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act dovetail nicely with Alaska's Education Challenge. She wants to see the proficiency rate in grade three reading increase. She wants to see continued academic growth and achievement in English, language arts, and math. In addition to the student goals, she said she wants to see Alaska's university system graduate more and more Alaskan teachers. Alaska has a teacher shortage and once Alaska gets those teachers Alaska must keep those teachers. She said she looks forward to continuing her service on the board.

[8:10:34 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY asked how Ms. Van Diest sees her role on the State Board in working with the University of Alaska and other policy makers across the state that influence the education of Alaska's children.

MS. VAN DIEST replied that the State Board has wanted to have meetings with the University of Alaska (UA) Board of Regents, but it hasn't happened in the three years she's been on the board. She offered her understanding that Commissioner Johnson and University of Alaska Interim President Pitney have recently been working on bringing members of the UA Board of Regents and State Board together for collaboration. She said she further understands that the report from the Teacher Retention and Recruitment Working Group may outline some areas of focus for the State Board and the UA Board of Regents, which she looks forward to hearing.

CO-CHAIR STORY offered her encouragement for the State Board and the UA Board of Regents to work together. In regard to the State Board's work in the area of student safety and wellbeing, she recalled that Ms. Van Diest's perspective is that in order for students to meet their academic goals they need to feel safe and secure. She said [the committee] has received some letters

with concerns about a grant obtained by the [State Board] for mental health education. She requested Ms. Van Diest's thoughts on educating people about the purpose of that grant and understanding the perspectives of where people are coming from.

8:13:14 AM

MS. VAN DIEST responded that social-emotional learning (SEL) is critical for students to be successful at school. Regarding specifics of the mental health grant, she deferred to the commissioner and his health team to provide an answer. In regard to the importance of social-emotional learning, she stated children must be able to acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage their emotions. She offered her support for the social-emotional learning bill [HB 25] before the committee on 3/29/21, and said it is critical that Alaska's students are able to set goals, are able to establish and maintain relationships, are able to make positive decisions, and make a connection with an adult in their school. She related that last fall when first starting at her current elementary school, the principal told her to establish relationships, and she has been doing that with both students and staff. It's definitely a critical issue, she reiterated.

CO-CHAIR STORY noted that the State Board's budget for this past year was cut to one in-person meeting and three virtual meetings. She asked whether that has worked for the board and whether the board was still able to meet its goals.

MS. VAN DIEST answered that meeting in-person allows board members to get to know one another and become comfortable with the topics coming before them, but the board has made it work. She related that after its most recent virtual meeting, the board had an afternoon of professional development, which was one of the first times the board felt it made connections with each other because members were able to visit and talk off the record, so to speak. When she says "visit" she means talking about educational topics that are critical to moving out of the pandemic and forward with getting all kids back into their learning environment. The board would like to meet in person, she continued, but members know that with the budget cuts and huge budget challenges facing the legislature, the board needs to take a hit along with everybody else.

8:17:38 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GILLHAM stated that in Anchorage the school board basically controls what the kids are taught. He requested Ms. Van Diest's opinion on the "critical race theory" that is trying to be pushed through in Anchorage.

MS. VAN DIEST replied she couldn't answer the question at this time because she isn't familiar with what is happening in Anchorage. She offered to get back with the representative and provide her opinion.

REPRESENTATIVE GILLHAM requested that Ms. Van Diest provide him with her opinion.

[8:18:46 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS asked what programs, policies, or efforts Ms. Van Diest has championed over the past few years and what she looks to do if reappointed to the board.

MS. VAN DIEST responded one thing she has learned over the past three years being in the elementary world is the pedagogy of that child. She cannot say she has championed a program, she stated, but she hasn't seen teachers work so hard as in an elementary school. She isn't disqualifying secondary teachers, she continued, but an elementary teacher is the end-all and be-all for that elementary child. She explained that in working closely with a child she is contacting the parent and oftentimes giving counseling and parenting tips and suggestions to that parent about their child. In terms of what she hopes to see on the State Board with SEL, she said she would first like to see [HB 25] passed. She related that the Mat-Su has a pretty robust program with SEL standards that are broken out by grade bands and connected to self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Using those components the teachers are able to incorporate those SEL skills in their classrooms, especially at that elementary level. Also, several [Mat-Su] elementary schools use a specific curriculum, either Second Step or Positive Action. She stated she would love to see Alaska develop standards in the social-emotional learning.

[8:21:58 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY noted the pandemic kept students in her district out of the classroom for most of 2020 and they are just now returning to a classroom environment. She requested Ms. Van Diest to speak to what the State Board's role is in ensuring

that Alaska's students, regardless of where they are located, have the resources they need in a post-pandemic environment.

MS. VAN DIEST answered that the State Board is very aware of what the impacts of COVID-19 have been across the state. The board knows there are children who did virtual, at-home, learning, with districts handling that in a variety of ways. She said there is nothing like that child being in the classroom with the teacher right there, reading body language and knowing when a child has a problem on a certain concept that is being taught. She said she believes the board's role in regard to that is to be supportive of what DEED is going to do. Money has come in for the districts based on their title funds; each district is able to get a pretty large chunk of money depending upon the size of the district. The State Board is going to look very carefully at the things DEED is doing to help those school districts. The board is not at all going to have a talk-down approach because it's the districts that need to decide. For example, Representative Zulkosky's district was hit very hard with barely any in-person learning while the Mat-Su district had in-person learning for most of the school year and is now coming down to its last quarter. She said she believes the State Board needs to let the districts decide how to use that money. The federal government has regulations on what the money is to be used for, and Congress and President Biden have now provided the third pot of money. She said she has heard different superintendents converse about using the money for summer school or to improve the reading scores within their districts.

[8:26:32 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND offered her understanding that Ms. Van Diest is currently working as an elementary school counselor in the Mat-Su Borough School District. She inquired whether it is a full- or part-time position.

MS. VAN DIEST responded that her elementary school counselor position is part-time because she is a retired schoolteacher.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND said she appreciates Ms. Van Diets' input on the social-emotional learning standards that are being offered in Representative Hopkins' bill [HB 25]. She noted that later in today's meeting the committee would be considering HB 60 on mental health education in schools. She requested Ms. Van Diest to look at the bill and provide her perspective on how the bill might work.

MS. VAN DIEST agreed to do so and said she would provide written comment to the entire committee by email.

8:29:11 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened the confirmation hearing for Lem Wheelles, appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

8:29:33 AM

LEM WHEELLES, Appointee, Professional Teaching Practices Commission, testified as appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission (PTPC). He explained that his appointment was one of last year's "in limbo" appointments, so this is his second year on the commission and second time before this committee for confirmation.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND related her understanding that Mr. Wheelles has actually been serving, but hasn't yet been officially confirmed because of the inability of the legislature to meet long enough due to the pandemic. She invited Mr. Wheelles to speak to why he would like to be officially appointed and continue to serve on this commission.

MR. WHEELLES stated it is an honor to have been nominated by the National Education Association-Alaska (NEA-Alaska) and appointed by Governor Dunleavy to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission. He offered his biographical, educational, and employment history [resume included in the committee packet], including that he earned a BA in Political Science and a Master's in Teaching from the University of Alaska Anchorage, has taught social studies for 17 years, has served on numerous Anchorage School District committees and task forces.

8:33:33 AM

MR. WHEELLES specified that his mission as an educator is to inspire all of his students to be engaged citizens. He empowers his students to be politically active by teaching them about their government and its history, and by providing them with opportunities to engage with their government. In his classroom he has hosted a sitting governor, members of Congress, members of the Alaska State Legislature, US Ambassadors, and Foreign Counsels. His students have taken what they have learned and applied it as campaign volunteers, legislative and congressional staffers, delegates to United Nations conferences, and

candidates for public office. His ultimate objective is to challenge his students to learn about their government as well as be an active part of it.

MR. WHEELLES, when asked, informs his students that he doesn't share his views with students because it would be unethical for him to do so and potentially sway their views. Similarly, he tells them that he doesn't care what their political views are, but he cares that they form political views and that they can articulate why they believe what they believe. He teaches his students about a variety of political beliefs and ideologies so they can form an educated opinion and engage in civic discourse with each other.

MR. WHEELLES stated that his goal as a teacher leader and member of the Professional Teaching Practices Commission (PTPC) is to hold his colleagues to these highest standards as well. As a recess appointee to the commission, he has served during the last several meetings of the PTPC. During his time on the commission he has advocated for reminders in the PTPC newsletter to educators about appropriate ways to deal with politics in the classroom. He has advised colleagues on numerous occasions about the proper way to deal with such subjects. He has also advised many students and a few parents on how to approach situations where they feel the teacher has crossed the line and pushed a particular political view. His goal is to be proactive and address these issues before they rise to the level of a complaint before the PTPC, but if they reach that level he is prepared to react appropriately.

MR. WHEELLES explained that as a quasi-judicial body, the PTPC is asked to adjudicate complaints against certificated educators, including teachers, counselors, principals, and superintendents. He said he does not take this role lightly. He appreciates that the legislature saw fit to create the PTPC over 50 years ago so that educators could hold their colleagues accountable and also so a jury of their peers could judge them. If he were ever the subject of a complaint to the PTPC, he continued, he would want to be judged by his peers who have a good grasp of what it means to be an educator in 2021.

[8:36:51 AM](#)

MR. WHEELLES pointed out that the PTPC is comprised of five teachers, a principal, a superintendent, a representative from higher education, and a representative from DEED. He said these educational professionals understand the challenges of being an

educator and want public education to be esteemed throughout Alaska. The PTPC works to promote professional and ethical behavior by all Alaskan educators through proactive education and outreach, and by responding to complaints when a violation has occurred.

MR. WHEELLES advised that the pandemic has created a number of new situations that pose ethical dilemmas for educators. Widespread virtual learning blurs the line between school and home, and educators have been called on to engage a much more electronic communication with students and families. District protocols surrounding health and safety present educators with difficult choices about continuing to teach, taking leave, or resigning. It must ensure that all educators are informed on the professional teaching code of ethics and the potential consequences for violations of it.

MR. WHEELLES stated that as a member of the PTPC, he would work to increase the commission's education and outreach efforts to ensure that all educators are familiar with the code of ethics and understand what it means for their professional practice. As a lifelong Alaskan and career educator with connections throughout the state, he continued, he is an ideal nominee for the PTPC. He is well informed on current education issues in the state and well respected by educators throughout Alaska.

8:38:38 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY remarked that quality educators are the number one in-school factor for student learning. She thanked Mr. Wheelles for taking that seriously and for making civics education so alive. She asked how the commission educates teachers in regard to ethics training, and getting out new information for making clear the lines and boundaries between home and school.

MR. WHEELLES responded that it's challenging, given districts are in all sorts of different situations with in-person, online, and hybrid arrangements. He said he asked the PTPC how it was going to respond and make educators be aware in spring 2020 when, under the governor's direction, districts across the state had all moved online. The PTPC, he noted, publishes a newsletter that goes to districts and educators across the state. When educators initially apply for their certification, as well as when they renew their teaching certificates every five years, they must acknowledge on their application the professional teaching code of ethics, that they understand they are bound by

it, and that their certificate is in jeopardy if they violate it. In addition, Melody Mann, PTPC's executive director and employee of DEED, does a lot of education and outreach on behalf of and at the direction of the commission. Ms. Mann has been able to engage more with educators this year on the commission's behalf because the virtual environment has allowed her to attend more conferences and speak to more groups of educators around the state about these issues. Normally she would be limited by a travel budget. Ms. Mann also works to educate superintendents and school boards about the code of ethics and the PTPC so they can ensure it's built into their teacher in-service training.

8:42:11 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked whether Mr. Wheelles is satisfied with the outreach that is occurring upon new teacher certifications and upon renewal, or whether he thinks contact should be increased between renewals.

MR. WHEELLES answered that he does see potential for additional outreach and education of teachers. He said DEED has introduced some additional online training for teachers to complete when they recertify through DEED's online education system, one example being suicide awareness and prevention training. Over the last year the commission has discussed whether it should be pushing for a module for teachers to complete, particularly for professional development. There's a balance to be had, he cautioned, because the more of those things that are piled on, the less focused people are in looking at and grasping them. So, the commission is presently looking at whether there is a good way to make a brief training module that teachers would go through when they initially certify and recertify.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND surmised civics education has been difficult for Mr. Wheelles during this pandemic, given that prior to COVID-19 he encouraged students to attend local assembly, school board, and other meetings that have now not been happening.

MR. WHEELLES confirmed it has been more of a challenge. He shared that over spring break he testified before the Senate Education Standing Committee regarding SB 72, which specifically deals with civics education. He explained that normally he would send his students out for firsthand in-person experience in seeing their government in action, because that is much more powerful than him just talking to them for an hour. Now, however, his classes have gone to looking at things virtually. For example, yesterday his class watched a hearing held by the

Alaska State Legislature and watched a congressional hearing on Washington DC statehood, a topic the students chose to watch. He said he also spends a lot of time with his students on how they interact with the government and how they can interact with the government. He includes things as simple as a voter registration online or a permanent fund dividend application. He explained he goes through those very practical steps as well because much of what students need to know about their government is how it will impact them on a day-to-day basis and where to find that information when they need it.

8:46:00 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND invited Mr. Wheelles to make closing comments.

MR. WHEELLES recalled the question to Ms. Van Diest about in-person meetings, and stated that this is a subject the PTPC commissioners have been discussing. He said Ms. Mann has submitted a budget request that would restore the PTPC's three meetings next year to in-person. He explained he is advocating for this because the PTPC is a quasi-judicial body that is asked at every meeting to consider sanctions against educative certificates, which includes warnings, reprimands, suspensions, revocations of certificates, and even revocations for life. Those are serious and affect people's livelihoods, which is why he so strongly believes in the PTPC. It is a jury of educators' peers, but having that judicial proceeding over Zoom or a teleconference is difficult. It is hard to have deliberative conversations when unable to read body language or other interactions. The commission has a hearing scheduled for this spring that is probably going to be delayed to summer because the PTPC has been told it cannot have an in-person meeting this spring. The respondent in the complaint wants an in-person hearing before the commission. It is unfortunate people must wait to get fair, in-person proceedings that could potentially affect their livelihoods. He therefore advocates for in-person meetings for the commission, he reiterated.

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND concurred it must be frustrating. She asked whether adjudications occurred during the "in limbo" time between when the court decided on the validity of the governor's appointees serving without having been confirmed.

MR. WHEELLES replied, "Fortunately, no." He said the PTPC meets three times a year, typically October, January, and April. The January meeting came after the legislature was back in session.

No meetings occurred during the mid-December to mid-January time period to which the court spoke.

[8:49:10 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:49 a.m. to 8:51 a.m.

[8:50:14 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened the confirmation hearing for Ralph Seekins, appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents. She invited Mr. Seekins to speak to why he would like to serve on this board.

[8:51:00 AM](#)

RALPH SEEKINS, Appointee, University of Alaska Board of Regents, testified as appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents. He offered his geographical, personal, and employment information [resume included in the committee packet], including that he has been a successful businessman, served as Senator and vice chair of the University Special Committee in the Alaska State Legislature, and has been active with the University of Alaska, in particular the Fairbanks campus.

MR. SEEKINS related that he was asked to be on the Board of Regents particularly during this time of tough transition and the challenges involved in making the university a smaller and more efficient organization. He stated he would like to be able to do that. He added that nothing is more valuable to a community than a university system that meets the educational needs of people who want to work in Alaska, and the university has done a good job with that. He said President Pitney is doing a tremendous job and he would like to help meet some of the challenges that the university system is facing, as well as make sure it survives and thrives and continues forward in meeting the educational needs for the job market in Alaska, whether four-year degrees, associate degrees, or certificates. A premier responsibility of the state is to provide that education and he is looking forward to working on the Board of Regents to make this happen. He is no longer on many of the boards he was previously on, so he has the time as well as the interest to meet this challenge.

[8:58:28 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND asked when Mr. Seekins was appointed to the Board of Regents. She further asked whether he has participated in any meetings yet.

MR. SEEKINS replied he was appointed in February [2021] and has been a participant or observer in all of the committee meetings for the Board of Regents, and a two-day meeting of the entire board. He said right now he is "kind of like a big sponge." He related that he has also been working with some of the administrators to get an even better picture of the challenges. He said he is impressed with the board chair and is looking forward to being a part of the board.

9:00:09 AM

REPRESENTATIVE PRAX asked whether Mr. Seekins has a particular vision for the university or has specific directions he thinks the university should take.

MR. SEEKINS responded that he has a dream for a more efficient and stable university system. Right now, he related, there is some chaos in the system and no stability. People are looking for jobs elsewhere because they don't know what the budget is going to be, and he would like to see that handled. He sees tremendous value in a number of different areas that need to be emphasized more in the university system. He appreciates that the university is reaching out to Bush communities using teleconferences, and this could be strengthened. Because he only has a short-term observation, he isn't making any critical evaluation, he said. Technical classes need to be stressed; an associate degree in automotive technology being one example, because everybody has a shortage in technicians at the moment. The construction industry is another example. His dream is to establish an efficient, strong university system that is meeting the needs of the employment opportunities in the state of Alaska. That can be done, and the university is doing a lot of that, but he hasn't yet had the opportunity to say exactly how. His dream and vision is to get stability in the system and work on making sure that those programs that are necessary are strong, surviving, and thriving.

9:03:42 AM

REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked how Mr. Seekins would "sell" the university's programs to the public. For example, he said he recently met with President Pitney and found out that, among

other things he didn't know, the university offers a one-year program to become an airline mechanic.

MR. SEEKINS replied that he is a marketer, given that being a car salesman is a people business. Communicating well with people needs to be done, and the university has not done a good job of that in the past. Parents and prospective students need to be shown that there is a tremendous system here that can meet those needs and that students don't need to go elsewhere. He said he has had discussions with the president and the chancellors in Fairbanks and Anchorage, and has told them that a better job needs to be done in communicating to the people of Alaska about the opportunity in Alaska at tremendously low cost compared to anywhere else. That can be done in a number of ways with programs, the athletic program being one way. For example, Gonzaga University increased its law school enrollment when its basketball program gained national prominence. Representative Cronk makes a good point, he added, because he didn't know everything that was going on in the university even though he was close to it.

[9:07:35 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY requested Mr. Seekins speak to his familiarity with the university's community campuses and the role that they play in the system and in their respective communities. She further asked whether Mr. Seekins has had the opportunity to visit any of the community campuses.

MR. SEEKINS answered he is getting more familiar with them and sees the value to them, but has not had the opportunity to visit some of those other community locations. He said that due to lack of outreach, people are unaware of the opportunity that community campuses present. Today's technology can be utilized, he continued, and it is vital to provide four-year degrees, associate degrees, and certificates. It is extremely valuable, but underutilized.

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY noted there has been ongoing discussion within the legislature regarding the university's organizational structure as it relates to its accreditation. She asked whether Mr. Seekins has a position on this.

[9:10:00 AM](#)

MR. SEEKINS replied it was a shame that the University of Alaska Anchorage had accreditation problems in its education

department, and it should never have happened. He offered his understanding that it was a good program, but they didn't answer the questions timely or didn't communicate well. He has talked with President Pitney and the chancellor, and they are adamant that all of the university's accreditation processes will be done in a timely and professional manner. The University of Alaska Fairbanks has received some tremendous feedback on some of its accreditation already. That slip in the past has focused attention back on ensuring that accreditation is maintained, has been done, and been done timely. He stated he doesn't anticipate that there is going to be a big problem with that in the future, and is sure the entire board will be looking at this.

REPRESENTATIVE ZULKOSKY clarified that she is more interested in the ongoing conversations from President Pitney's predecessor about organizing the University of Alaska under a single accreditation as opposed to multiple accreditations that are held in Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau. She inquired about Mr. Seekins' perspective in this regard.

MR. SEEKINS responded he doesn't know that that approach would be valuable, although it may be. He suggested that rather than combining every education department under a single university, it would be more valuable to have portability of credits so that credits earned in Anchorage could be brought to Fairbanks without having to retake the classes. Given the geographical distances in Alaska, he posited that combining into a single system would lose some efficiency in the individual campuses. He offered his understanding that the approach was offered not to be more efficient or provide a better education, but as a way to handle some budget constraints. He stated he would be nervous about making it one big university because he thinks it would lose some of the focus of the individual campuses.

9:14:56 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY said she looks at the State of Alaska as having an education system of K-12, university, and the business community, with all working well together. Pre-teaching is so important with the university, she continued. The university is offering its teaching programs because of wanting [kids] to be ready to come into Alaska's K-12 system. She related that Ms. Van Diest, a member and appointee to the State Board of Education & Early Development, told the committee earlier today that in the last three years the State Board has been unable to get together with the Board of Regents to talk about how the

systems are working together. She said she is concerned about systems becoming silos. She asked whether Mr. Seekins believes the boards need to do their work separately or whether he sees the different systems and policymakers working together.

MR. SEEKINS answered that he has always been a strong advocate for having as much collaboration as possible and looking at the challenges on both sides of the street. While he doesn't know what the impediments were for being unable to meet, he said he thinks such meetings would be particularly fruitful, and he would encourage that these boards meet, although it isn't up to him to schedule it. He agreed that silos aren't needed. He noted the university system is giving credit for some classes in high school where the students don't have to pay tuition. For example, his grandson had enough such credits that he was able to enter the university system as a junior.

[9:18:02 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HOPKINS inquired about the funding pact between the Board of Regents and the governor a few years ago. He asked whether Mr. Seekins supports that pact and how Mr. Seekins sees it working for cutting the final \$25 million that is required as part of that three-year plan. He further asked what Mr. Seekins' priorities as a regent would be when those cuts and decisions come down.

MR. SEEKINS replied he that he wasn't there during that time, but stated it would have been impossible to be able do that without creating some big holes and he appreciates that the governor worked with the university system on more of a stepped basis. He is unsure whether the amount was correct because he's not had the opportunity to evaluate it, but he knows tremendous insecurity was created among people at the university and some left for positions elsewhere. While he isn't criticizing the governor, he said he probably would have taken a longer-term step-down had he been in that position. When looking at where to find a more efficient operation and which systems to cut, consideration must be given as to which systems are vital to the people of Alaska. Any university can take a 10 percent cut, but after that it is cutting into bone, not just muscle and fat. As this is considered, he is hoping that Alaska's "only child" isn't killed in the hopes of producing another one.

[9:21:33 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND noted that the agreement between the Board of Regents and the governor bypassed the legislature's prerogative in setting that budget for the university. She asked how Mr. Seekins, as a former member of the legislature, feels about how that process transpired.

MR. SEEKINS responded that knowing the responsibilities of the legislature he didn't like that process, but he doesn't want to be critical of the governor. He said he maybe would not have done it that way because he understands that the budget process is a proposal from the governor, but the final process is the responsibility of the legislature, and he would protect that.

[9:23:02 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened public testimony on the appointees to the State Board of Education & Early Development, the Professional Teaching Practices Commission, and the University of Alaska Board of Regents. She closed public testimony after ascertaining that no one wished to testify.

[9:23:40 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR STORY [made a motion to advance the confirmations of] Lorrie Van Diest, appointee to the State Board of Education & Early Development; Lem Wheelles, appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission; and Ralph Seekins, appointee to the University of Alaska Board of Regents to a joint session of the legislature for consideration. She reminded the committee [that signing the reports regarding appointments to the boards and commissions] does not reflect intent by any committee member to vote for or against an appointee for purposes of confirmation. [There being no objection, the names of Lorri Van Diest, Lem Wheelles, and Ralph Seekins were forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.]

[9:24:32 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:24 a.m. to 9:28 a.m.

HB 60-PUBLIC SCHOOLS: MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

[9:27:50 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 60, "An Act relating to mental health education."

9:28:00 AM

CO-CHAIR STORY moved to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 60, Version 32-LS0261\B, Klein, 3/25/21, as a work draft.

9:28:17 AM

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND objected for purposes of discussion.

9:28:29 AM

REPRESENTATIVE MATT CLAMAN, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 60. He stated that the bill would amend the existing K-12 public school health education statute to include mental health education guidelines. He explained that, currently, the health curriculum guidelines developed by the State Board of Education & Early Development include learning about prevention and treatment of diseases, good health practices like diet and exercise and personal hygiene, and bad health habits such as substance abuse, alcoholism, and physical abuse. But the guidelines do not address mental health.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN related that this bill was brought to his attention in 2019 by a college student who successfully advocated for similar legislation when he was in high school in Virginia, and who then worked with a group of Alaska high school students advocating for increased mental health resources in Alaska schools. These students spoke of their own struggles with mental health as well as those of their peers. Some students even said their mental health struggles began as early as elementary school. These students continue to say that while they learned about treatments for physical health at school there wasn't nearly enough conversation about mental health with their friends and teachers.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN specified that Alaska's adolescent suicide rate is three times higher than the nationwide rate. Alaska's adolescent suicide rates are increasing, he noted. According to the 2019 Alaska High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which surveyed 1,875 students in grades 9-12 from 39 high schools across the state, the percentage of students who have attempted suicide has doubled since 2007. Given that 50 percent of all lifetime cases of a mental illness begin by age 14, and 75 percent by age 24, these conversations about mental health need to be started at an early age.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN said HB 60 requires the State Board of Education & Early Development to work with representatives from tribal and mental health organizations to update the health education standards to include guidelines in mental health education. Once the legislation passes it will be up to high schools and school districts across Alaska whether to use the guidelines to incorporate mental health into their education curriculum. As is the case with current health education curriculum, the Department of Education & Early Development (DEED) is available to assist schools with incorporating health standards into local curriculum. He stressed that HB 60 does not create or mandate that schools adopt a curriculum.

REPRESENTATIVE CLAMAN said the state has a responsibility to treat the current mental health crisis in Alaska as a serious public health issue. This bill underscores the notion that mental health is just as important as physical health and should be treated as such. Conversations about mental health must be normalized starting at an early age, just as is done with physical health, in order to de-stigmatize mental illness and increase knowledge on the fundamental aspects of mental health, as well the causes, risk factors, and treatments for mental illness.

[9:31:43 AM](#)

SOPHIE JONAS, Staff, Representative Matt Claman, Alaska State Legislature, on behalf of Representative Claman, prime sponsor of HB 60, provided a sectional analysis of the proposed committee substitute, Version B. She began by first relating that during a hearing of the Senate companion bill, SB 80, in the Senate Education Standing Committee (SEDC), the Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and the Alaska Mental Health Board recommended changing the intent language to eliminate organizations that were specifically listed out so as to not exclude anyone. Additionally, there was confusion about the word "standard" as opposed to "guideline." So, she explained, the proposed work draft before this committee mirrors the changes that were adopted in the Senate Education Standing Committee.

MS. JONAS reviewed the sectional analysis for the proposed work draft, Version B. She said Section 1 adds intent language stating it is the intent of the legislature that the Board of Education & Early Development develop guidelines for instruction in mental health in consultation with the Department of Health

and Social Services, regional tribal health organizations, and representatives of national and state mental health organizations.

MS. JONAS stated that Section 2 amends AS 14.30.360(a) by removing the word "physical" when referencing instruction for health education and adding "mental health" to the list of curriculum items that each district is encouraged to include in health education programs.

MS. JONAS specified that Section 3 amends AS 14.30.360(b) by adding that, in addition to establishing guidelines for health and personal safety education programs, the State Board of Education & Early Development shall establish guidelines for developmentally appropriate instruction in mental health.

MS. JONAS explained that Section 4 amends the uncodified law of the State of Alaska by providing that the State Board of Education & Early Development shall develop the aforementioned guidelines within two years of the effective date of this Act.

[9:34:28 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND opened invited testimony.

[9:34:43 AM](#)

JASON LESSARD, Executive Director, National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), Anchorage Chapter, provided invited testimony in support of HB 60. He first noted that he is the parent of a current Anchorage School District (ASD) student and a graduate of the ASD. He said it is important to recognize that mental health is health; there is not one without the other. While that is a simple and obvious statement, it is still a struggle to incorporate that concept into school curricula. This is why NAMI chapters in Alaska and the Lower 48 are advocating for the types of updates and guidance in bills like HB 60.

MR. LESSARD related that while there is much national and Alaska centric data relevant to this conversation, he will focus on just two in the interest of time. He said the first data point is that one in five U.S. adults experiences a mental illness. Given this prevalence, he urged members to think about how many people they may know or how many high school students might go home to a family member with a mental illness. This is not just talking to students about their own mental health, this is about having evidence-based curricula that discusses and de-mystifies

a set of illnesses that affects 20 percent of the population. And, he added, that's just adults and just diagnosable mental illnesses. He urged members to think about the benefits that these conversations concerning wellness and self-care could have on helping students to process grief or a depressive episode that don't have anything to do with mental health necessarily.

MR. LESSARD said the next data point is that 50 percent of all lifetime mental illnesses begin by age 14, and 75 percent begin by age 24. He pointed out that age 14 is a ninth grader. These illnesses are showing their onset largely in the teenage brain, he continued, and it's really important to talk about it with them in a healthy, supportive, and effective manner. This is why this type of legislation and, hopefully, changes to curricula throughout Alaska's districts is critical. Giving students a better understanding of mental illness and mental wellness, the language to talk about it safely, the understanding of how and where to find resources for themselves, their family, and their peers is vital. He urged committee members to support HB 60 and pointed out that it will help to address these topics in an evidence-based, proactive, and caring way.

[9:37:39 AM](#)

CLAIR RHYNEER, Representative, Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling (MHATS), provided invited testimony in support of HB 60. She noted she is testifying on behalf of MHATS as well as herself. She related that a few years ago she experienced a difficult and dark period of depression. But more than being difficult and dark, she said, her experience was governed by confusion. She was self-harming and all she felt was uncertainty. Did she need help? How should she know? She turned to Google and took dozens of "Are you depressed quizzes?" However, she continued, Google is not a doctor and is in no position to diagnose a seventh grade girl, let alone anyone, and it left her more confused. Each night she wondered not only what was wrong, but if something was wrong at all. In hindsight it is terrifying to know that she was physically harming herself and still unsure if she needed support.

MS. RHYNEER pointed out that she isn't the only one. She said she could personally count on more than one hand the number of close friends who experienced suicidal ideation, and all of them filled the gap of mental health education with scrappy online resources. In 2019, she continued, 20 percent of ASD students reported attempting suicide one or more times. That means

roughly four people in each of her classes attempted suicide that year. This bill would teach someone like her younger self about how to recognize symptoms of mental illness, and what to do moving forward. She doesn't wish her experience on anyone else and the best way of achieving that goal is to inform Alaska's youth. She continued: "We cannot be satisfied with Google University. We cannot be satisfied with allowing my friends and classmates and your constituents and neighbors to remain uneducated. We cannot knowingly let our students experience the confusion and harm that I felt." She said HB 60 must be passed.

[9:39:55 AM](#)

KEEGAN BLAIN, Representative, Mental Health Advocacy Through Storytelling (MHATS), provided invited testimony in support of HB 60. She said she is testifying on behalf of MHATS as well as herself, a graduate of Dimond High School. She related that while growing up her parents had all the standard conversations with her, and answered questions like the standard health questions about sex and where the places are that only a doctor should touch. At 10 years old, her elementary school health teacher had her and her peers practicing saying no to alcohol and drugs. At age 13 her middle school health teacher taught about STDs and the major signs of domestic abuse. Ms. Blain stated that 10 years old is the age when her symptoms of depression first started, and at 13, she was institutionalized for the first time. She felt alone in her fight against her own mind. She had never been taught what mental illness was. She didn't know if she could go back to school, whether she should tell her friends and teachers. It was completely uncharted territory.

MS. BLAIN said the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services reports that from 2005-2006, 8.6 percent of adolescents aged 12-17 reported having a major depressive episode. That percentage nearly doubled to 15.2 percent from 2015-2016. There is a clear upward trend in cases of mental illness in Alaskan teens, she continued, but no response at the educational level. She stated she is a success story of the Anchorage School District. She graduated summa cum laude from Dimond and has gone on to study bioengineering at a top research university, but the odds were against her. Sixty percent of students with a diagnosed mental illness don't ever graduate high school, she specified. Research has shown that early intervention is key to preventing the development of severe mental illness in later years, and HB 60 has the potential to bring that intervention

into Alaska's schools. She asked committee members to please take this first step towards bringing mental health education to Alaska's students who so desperately need it.

[9:42:30 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND held over HB 60 for further consideration and public testimony. [The motion to adopt the proposed committee substitute (CS) for HB 60, Version 32-LS0261\B, Klein, 3/25/21, as a work draft was left pending with an objection.]

[9:42:46 AM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Education Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:43 a.m.